

On the experience of a melancholic gaze

Caroline Bainbridge

Abstract

This article focuses on Lars von Trier's 2011 film, *Melancholia*, described as 'a beautiful film about the end of the world' and interlocking personal and global tragedy. Drawing directly on her personal emotional response to the film, and referring to her profound incapacity to talk about it for many years after an initial encounter with it, the author turns to a range of object relations psychoanalytic thinkers to consider what such experience has to say about lived emotional relationships to cinema, and its role in shaping and articulating psychological, and affective states. The article touches on debates about the cinematic gaze, and the role of film as a psychological object, and considers whether film might be seen as offering a form of therapeutic encounter for viewers.

Keywords: *Melancholia*; Lars von Trier; cinema; affect; film; object relations

Author Bio

Caroline Bainbridge is Professor of Culture and Psychoanalysis at Roehampton University in London. She is a recent graduate of the Tavistock and Portman NHS Clinic programme, Consultation and the Organisation: Psychoanalytic Approaches, and undertook her postdoctoral work at the Centre for Psychotherapeutic Studies at the University of Sheffield. Caroline edits the film section of *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, and is a Fellow of the College established by that journal. She also directs the Media and the Inner World research network which was funded

by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council between 2009-13. Caroline's editorial commitments also include series editorship for the 'Psychoanalysis and Popular Culture' list published by Routledge, and she is a founding member of the BPC Scholar Steering Group, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Her research interests focus on psychoanalytic approaches to cinema, television, gender, and popular culture.

Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (Denmark, 2011) is a film about the end of the world. More specifically, it is a film about the approach of the end of the world as a result of the Earth crashing into an enormous planet named Melancholia. True to form, von Trier does not pull any punches when it comes to symbolism that lacks subtlety – this work is full of heightened melodrama on an epic scale, all of which is reinforced through the film's aesthetics. Both Manuel Alberto Claro's cinematography and the musical score combine to lend emotional weight and torpor to the drama, adding to von Trier's reputation for making bold cinema that lays down copious affective and psychological challenges. This particular film's invitation into the melancholic state of mind is one that is difficult to resist. Coloured as it is by the director's own well documented experiences of mental illness and collapse, the full force of *Melancholia* is gruelling for even the most hardened critics: Jonathan Romney (2011), for example, describes the film as 'severe and graceful', remarking that watching it persuaded him to forgive von Trier for making *Antichrist* (Denmark, 2009). In *The Telegraph*, Sukhdev Sandhu (2011) noted that the film was 'emotionally seismic' despite the claims made elsewhere that it was an exercise in narcissistic solipsism (French 2011). Broadly speaking, even the British tabloid press hailed the film's beguiling aesthetics and its intense treatment of 'manic depression' and 'existential angst' (Palmer 2011), despite the reviewer at *The Express* (Hunter 2011) finding the characters 'annoying'.

My own personal experience of the film was deeply imbued with an overwhelming sense of desolation, a feeling that was difficult to shake off, and which felt insistent in its capacity to inhabit my imagination and memory over time. *Melancholia* took on a profound bleakness for me, and I found it impossible to speak about either these feelings or the film itself for many months – indeed, years. I felt as though something unspeakable had taken place inside me, although I was nevertheless

consumed by a plenitudinous sense of the film's astonishing beauty. As an affective viewing experience, watching *Melancholia* was awe-inspiring in all its entangled senses: the film is beautiful, terrible, majestic, and fearful all at once. And yet, I hesitate to name my experience as sublime. Its texture was profoundly psychological for me, demanding thoughtful reflection and contemplation in order for the experience to make any sense. As a psychoanalytic scholar, I felt certain that processing the experience would deepen my thinking about theory, and that the conceptual framework of ideas would allow me to analyse and understand my own visceral response. And yet, for many years, I felt incapable of speaking about this film, finding that I was incapable of voicing any aspect of my experience, despite not being able to lose sight of the film's imagery in my mind's eye. I could not find a way to put into words the extent of my embodied emotional depth of feeling prompted by the film's narrative and plot.

This sense of feeling "stuck" paradoxically intensified my awareness of the need to interrogate my resistance, in an effort to understand, by using the tools of psychoanalysis, exactly *what* about this film I was unable to digest and mentalise. In turn, this heightened awareness of what I was *not* doing – of what I did not feel *able* to do – and began to impact on my confidence about my *capacity* to think psychoanalytically at all. I found myself constantly questioning my thought processes as well as my competence (as a non-clinician) to work with complex psychoanalytic ideas. In short, I began to fear that, when it came to this film, I was irretrievably caught up in a mode of melancholic thinking, a state of mind that only began to be challenged once I received an invitation to discuss the film in public some years later. Even then, I struggled to mobilise my thinking, and, in the end, opted to discuss my *experience* of the film as a way of trying to reflect on its artistic and affective power.

These thoughts are the ones being used here to give shape to this article, and my discussion will range freely across personal experience, psychoanalytic theory, and critical approaches to the film as both text and mediated object, as I attempt to grapple with what it might mean to experience what I shall coin as “a melancholic gaze”.

It is well documented that von Trier’s aim in making this film and its predecessor, *Antichrist*, was to grapple with his personal experiences of clinical depression, and to use film making as a ‘tool to get out of bed’ (More 4, no date). I have written elsewhere (Bainbridge 2014, p. 56) about the rich thematic content of von Trier’s work, and its scope ‘to allow for a kind of working through that might be seen as therapeutic for both the director and viewers of his films’, making specific reference to the psychological mechanism of projective identification, and to the notions of containment and holding space described in the work of Wilfrid Bion and Donald Woods Winnicott respectively. In that discussion, I suggested that the graphic content of von Trier’s films co-exists with popular media commentary on his experience of mental illness, and that this combination allows audiences to internalise the projections, and to process them as a form of communication about unspeakable experience. Here, by contrast, I wish to focus in more depth on the characteristics of the kind of viewing experience evoked by *Melancholia* in particular, and to consider the film as a psychological object of sorts. In this guise, the film affects viewers through its conjuring of mood, but it also enables a deeper understanding of how cinema can furnish spectators with an experience of maternal containment that allows the exploration of unthinkable and unspeakable experience. What follows, then, is an excursion through my thought process about *Melancholia*, and the critical theoretical and conceptual ideas associated with this, which I offer here as a way into

understanding the challenges and invitations extended by Lars von Trier by means of his work as an artistic project.

To begin with, there is Melanie Klein. The filmic narrative of *Melancholia* almost demands a Kleinian reading with its striking themes of splitting, annihilation, persecutory anxiety, paranoia, and, of course, the bad parental objects. At the most basic level of the plot, splitting is in operation throughout, as von Trier contrasts sisters Justine (Kirsten Dunst) and Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), their individual experiences of close, personal relationships, and the approach of the deadly planet. The film itself is also in two parts, evoking even in its structure the concept of splitting, as it reveals the distinct emotional textures of lived and affective experience from the perspectives of different characters. For Klein (1930), the mechanism of splitting is key to the paranoid-schizoid position and to early infantile experience, when objects are largely distinguished as “wholly good” or “wholly bad” for the baby during the struggle to integrate competing and contradictory experiences of love and hate. This also leads to internalised uses of splitting in relation to the ego as an active form of psychological defence (Klein 1933; 1946), working in tandem with projective impulses to rid the infant of intolerable feelings and anxieties. Splitting is of fundamental importance in the Kleinian formulation of the paranoid-schizoid position, which is rooted in the infant’s earliest, pre-linguistic psychological experience, with all its associated anxieties and defences. The paranoid-schizoid position is also linked to the development of relatedness to both internal and external objects, a theme that resonates in von Trier’s film thanks to its deployment of the imagined planet, *Melancholia*, and its symbolic power to conjure up the emotional and psychological dimensions of character and plot. The film’s externalisation of the overwhelming threat of annihilation, together with its apparent imminence and reality,

helpfully metaphorises the kinds of psychological mechanism linked by Klein to the paranoid-schizoid phases of development. The projection of paranoid fears of disintegration and annihilation is central to the plot of *Melancholia*, speaking to aspects of the most primitive forms of human nature, but this also reveals the texture of adult melancholic experience, illustrating how the stultifying sense of incapacity and ineptitude in the face of all-consuming depression simply cannot be communicated effectively. Justine's deep depression and her inability to talk, eat, or function is unspeakable, and yet so palpable in this film, showing that von Trier's directorial style can help viewers to understand something of the quality of such experience.

As is well documented, Klein differs slightly (but also importantly) from Sigmund Freud in her conceptualisation of melancholia, in that for Klein, all losses revive earlier experiences of loss and so require the reworking of the internal world in order for recovery to take place. For Klein, the infantile depressive position 'is a melancholia in *statu nascendi*'. All losses, both real and phantasied, are rooted in the experience of early infantile losses of what she describes as 'the mother's breast and all that the breast and milk have come to stand for in the infant's mind: namely, love, goodness and security. All of these are felt by the baby to be lost, and lost as a result of his own uncontrollable greedy and destructive impulses' (1940, p. 345).

For Klein, then, the unconscious phantasy underpinning the experience of loss is to be understood in terms of the baby 'having lost his [sic] internal "good" objects ... He then feels that his [sic] internal "bad" objects predominate and his [sic] inner world is in danger of disruption' (1940, p. 353). Splitting is key here, and Klein alerts us to this dimension of the melancholic experience – the reversion to an early infantile paranoid-schizoid mechanism leads to idealisation and denigration, and these come to

characterise the melancholic disposition. There are affinities here with Freud's (1917, p. 258) formulation of the more manic formations of melancholia in terms of ambivalence, and this is another theme of von Trier's film, played out most starkly in the Oedipal triangle of Claire, John (Kiefer Sutherland), and their son, Leo (Cameron Spurr). While John repeatedly attempts to reassure Leo and Claire of their safety, he takes the cowardly decision to kill himself once he realises that the planet's advance toward Earth is inevitable. He does this without regard for the impact on his surviving family members, plunging Claire into her own existential angst and maternal ambivalence. It is, ironically, the melancholic Justine who is able to devise and sustain a form of containment, in her building of the tipi structure inside which they all sit holding hands at the end of the film (and, of course, at the fictional end of the world). In building the "magic cave" for Leo, Justine manages to forge a sense of relatedness in the face of imminent annihilation. The viewer is left asking whether this "ending" signifies a recovery of some sort, and puzzling about what it would mean to recover in order only to die? In this conundrum lies the kernel of what it means to be human, and the challenges entailed in attempting to grapple with this question.

In a discussion of how the melancholic individual is better equipped for catastrophe (Sweet 2011: 05:37-06:42), von Trier himself has remarked,

it's very likely that it will be a person with some mental illness that will be the hero that kind of drags children out of a burning train, or stuff like that, because, people who have never been there before ... never had an anxiety ... never thought about this side of life, will panic completely, whereas Justine has been there before, and therefore can be much more rational.

For von Trier, the profound experience of depression familiarises the subject with the kind of despair associated with the disintegration of the world and its accessibility. A Kleinian approach to this thematic must also consider the relationship to parental figures (or objects) who provide (or fail to provide) the infant with the kind of containment evoked by von Trier in his discussion of the film's closing sequence.

Melancholia offers its viewers a deeply dysfunctional family constellation, linking Justine's melancholic state to her parents and their ineptitude and failures. It also shows how such dysfunctionality underpins and influences relationship patterns that emerge in later life, as Justine struggles to deal with her sleazy, gaslighting boss (Stellan Skarsgård), and cuts herself off from her newly-wed husband (Michael [Alexander Skarsgård]) within hours of her marriage. Justine's father, Dexter (John Hurt), and mother, Gaby (Charlotte Rampling), are acrimoniously divorced and profoundly narcissistic, unable to relate to Justine and manipulating her to their own ends. Similarly, her boss, Jack, uses his wedding speech as an opportunity ruthlessly to bully Justine about a pending work deadline that she will later fail to meet, seemingly triggering her melancholic episode, and fracturing her capacity for relatedness with apparently immediate effect.

Later, following an indeterminate period after the wedding, Justine arrives to stay with Claire, John, and Leo during a very profound and debilitating episode of depression. It appears that Justine is beyond help, and no amount of effort by Claire can help her. When Claire cooks Justine's favourite dish (meatloaf), Justine cannot bear to eat, complaining that it only tastes of ash. Her only point of sustained emotional connection is with her horse, Abraham, but even he appears to let her down, and she becomes violent toward the animal, heartlessly whipping it into

submission. The imagery in such scenes is riven with symbolism, but it also calls to mind the Kleinian framework of internalised objects, the mechanism of projection, and their importance for psychological development.

According to Klein, internal objects are rooted in the infant's earliest relationship to the parents, and they are crucial for sustaining mental health. In her discussion of the psychogenesis of "manic-depressive" states, Klein (1935, p. 265) asserts the close link between the paranoid and melancholic states of mind, observing that the superego becomes relentlessly severe in the context of melancholia partly as a result of the ego's 'torturing and perilous dependence on its loved objects' (1935, p. 277). Nevertheless, the melancholic is compelled to cling on to its internal objects because 'its identification with [them] is too profound to be renounced' (1935, p. 277). For the melancholic, then, the defence mechanisms of the paranoid-schizoid stage, especially those of denial and splitting, become fundamentally important for survival. Klein (1935, p. 287) notes that 'ambivalence, carried out in a splitting of the imagoes, enables the small child to gain more trust and belief in its real objects and thus in its internalised ones—to love them more and to carry out in an increasing degree its phantasies of restoration on the loved object'. It is splitting, together with ambivalence about the impending catastrophic event, that helps Justine to step out of her catatonic state, and to find within her the resources to distinguish between "real", external objects such as Claire and Leo, and the persecutory internalised versions that dominated the internal landscape of her mind during her depression.

It is worth noting here, again, that von Trier also deploys splitting in the formal construction of this narrative. In this film, he abandons his usual penchant for a singular lead female character, instead deciding to cast *two* women, and to divide the narrative into two complementary parts. Building on Klein's observation that all

internal objects are grounded in the experience of the earliest parental imagoes, and on von Trier's own candid admission that this film, like *Antichrist*, was conceived in response to his own history of clinical depression, it is interesting to contextualise these formal and directorial decisions with reference to a story that von Trier likes to tell about his personal relationship with his mother, and a shock disclosure that she made to him just before she died:

On her deathbed, in 1995, Inger confessed that Ulf, who had died when von Trier was 18, had not been his real father – he was actually a moderately famous Danish composer, with whom Inger had had an affair in order to provide Lars with an artistic genetic inheritance. Inger assured von Trier that his biological father would welcome him, but their meeting was not a success: 'I hated him', says von Trier, 'and he didn't want see me. He instructed me to communicate through his lawyers'. The events precipitated what von Trier calls 'my first real breakdown'. In 1996, two months after his mother's death, he left his wife, Caecilia Holbeck, who was pregnant with their second child, and took up with their nanny, Bente Froge, with whom he now has two boys. He converted to Catholicism (having previously believed himself to be Jewish, as Ulf was). (Husband 2008)

Subsequently, von Trier has asserted that *Melancholia* is intended in the spirit of saying “Fuck you!” to his mother, years after these events took place, giving us insight into the persistence of traumatic feeling and fury. The splitting that shapes both the filmic narrative and its form symbolises, perhaps, one means of externalising the conflicted ambivalence around the internalised maternal imago when a beloved

mother unveils a deceit that has profound ramifications at a point in time when her loss is imminent and irrecoverable. If, as von Trier has repeatedly asserted, filmmaking is a tool for the management of depression and for recovery from it, then the formal structure of the film could be seen to symbolise the psychical strategies at work. For the viewer, there is plenty of scope for resonance with individual experiences of mental ill health and/or ambivalence, and *Melancholia* provides both opportunities for identification with characterological experience, and for deeply affective reverberations prompted by the *mise-en-scène* and filmic structure combined. *Melancholia*, then, is potentially stirred up in the viewer unconsciously, deepening our understanding of the workings of projective identification in cinema, as I shall discuss below.

Plenty could also be said about the melancholic texture of experience symbolised by Claire and John, their dance around suicide, and by the scenes depicting the interplanetary clash to come with the opportunities that this affords to Justine for revelling in her melancholy literally by bathing in the light of the threatening planet (Figure 1). All of these narrative dimensions fuel the mood of melancholy that pervades the film. As film philosopher, Robert Sinnerbrink (2016, p. 106) notes, *Melancholia*

explores, in an evocative fashion, the kinship between melancholia and artistic creativity, the kind of aesthetic mood regarded as conducive to aesthetically mediated ways of knowing ... One of the most striking aspects of *Melancholia*'s aesthetics of mood concerns the manner in which it also evokes an ethical sensibility or acknowledgement of the fragility, vulnerability, and value of life on our planet.



Figure 1: Justine bathes in the light of planet Melancholia (frame grab still from *Melancholia*, dir. Lars von Trier, 2011. Used under fair use policy guidelines.)

As Sinnerbrink (2016, p. 107), goes on to state,

it is important to distinguish between moods attributed to a character perspective and moods expressed by the work of art itself. ... The mood of a work is distinct from the mood of the spectator, even though the work's mood – expressing, for example, the perspective of the film's narration, of a narrator, or a character – usually aims to elicit certain moods from its audience.

For Sinnerbrink, this “ethical” dimension of cinematic moodfulness charts a complex relationship between moral, psychological, existential, and ontological dimensions of experience. It is useful to deepen Sinnerbrink's important reading of *Melancholia* as

mood by reflecting on the role of the unconscious, and its impact on affective engagement with art, and the work of Christopher Bollas (1987) is helpful here.

Bollas (1987, pp. 99-100) observes that ‘we need to experience moods’ and that ‘some moods establish fragments of former self states’. Building on these ideas, Bollas discusses a number of case examples in which moodfulness impacts on the capacity of the analyst to function as a transformational object for the analysand, noting that, in some cases, specifically when moods resemble ‘intense affect sensations’ (Bollas 1987, p. 109), they provide a way ‘to preserve sensation as a way of life’. This insight seems highly pertinent for this discussion of *Melancholia*, and for my understanding of my own moodful incapacity to respond to the experience of viewing the film. Bollas (1987, p. 111) goes on to theorise the concept of ‘the conservative object’ that is formed in response to undergoing ‘an intensely private self experience that defies representative capacity, so that the being state persists as a conserved rather than transformed (symbolized) phenomenon’. Linking the conserved object to the unthought known, Bollas argues that a mood can release a conserved object, and he links this to the vulnerability associated with a person who is ‘caught in a mood’ (1987, p.112), suggesting that ‘it is as if we are witness to an element of the “kernel” (Winnicott, 1952) of the person being acted out in our presence’. To an extent, then, my apparently intense resistance – another feature attributed by Bollas to psychoanalytic knowing of the conservative object – to von Trier’s film can be understood as being ‘caught up’ in its profoundly melancholic mood such that my own psyche was unable to represent the experience, to cognise it, or to link the being state it evokes with any one object of my own. Bollas (1987, pp. 110-11) usefully sums up the overwhelmingly affective consequence of such experience: ‘Such self states are ... untranslatable into that symbolic order characteristic of object

representation: they yield, instead, identity senses ... the being state persists as a conserved object'. The melancholic gaze plunges us into the unthought known, and this is the achievement of von Trier's work in my view.

As spectators of *Melancholia*, we do actually know in advance that, in this tale, everyone will die in the end. This is thanks to the film's overture, a precursor to the film that "rephrases" or "rehearses" the story yet to come. In his writing on a Lacanian approach to the psychology of melancholia, Russell Grigg (2014) cites an observation made by Goethe: 'We die twice: first when we die, and then when those who knew and loved us die'. This seems highly apposite when we think about how the narrative of this film unfolds. As spectators, of course, we do not literally die, but we do take up identificatory perspectives on scenes of total earthly annihilation, and so we might be said to die at the level of fantasy at least. We are placed in an apparently impossible position by the film's ending – we watch a story that entails the total destruction of all life and yet, paradoxically, we survive this annihilation and live to tell the tale, perhaps to watch it over again, albeit the case that we might not feel able to speak its impact as in my own experience. This is surely a very melancholic paradox, and one that richly reverberates with Bollas's formulation of the unthought known.

The overture has an important function for the viewer of this film, acting as what Griselda Pollock (1998, p. 113) describes in her work on Jan Vermeer, as an 'index of a lost moment before a death' in which 'the anguish of loss is not in the image itself, but in the practice of its restaged [pre-staged?] encounter where to look is to feel'. For me, this cinematic beginning plays an important part in shaping the spectator's relationship to the film as an object, allowing us to envision our relationship to what we see on screen in ways that circumvent the kind of narcissistic

over-identification with the image theorised in perspectives on spectatorship and desire (Doane 1996). As Serge Tisseron (2013, p. 122) has suggested, ‘fiction sets in play a continuous back-and-forth movement between the internalisation of certain of the hero's traits and the projection of certain aspects of oneself onto the hero’. The cultural object invites relatedness, allowing the viewer actively (and yet also unconsciously) to engage with it. As we know from Winnicott, our encounters with culture provide opportunities to re-visit transitional phenomena, the first of which is the maternal breast, and I am struck here by the image of planet Melancholia striking the Earth in longshot and its symbolic evocation of the breast (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The collision between Earth and planet Melancholia (frame grab still from *Melancholia*, dir. Lars von Trier, 2011. Used under fair use policy guidelines.)

For Winnicott, transitional phenomena allow us to experience anew the creative bridging between internal and external worlds following on from the holding experience with the mother, and our eventual separation from her. Yet it is important

to distinguish the kind of engagement we make with the object if we are to understand its psychological function.

Winnicott reminds us that in object-relating: ‘the subject allows certain alterations in the self to take place ... The object has become meaningful’ (Winnicott 1969, p. 712). In object usage: ‘because of the survival of the object, the subject may now have started to live a life in the world of objects, and so the subject stands to gain immeasurably.’ (1969, p. 713) Because the object is capable of always being destroyed, it is felt by the subject to be more real (1969, p. 715). The object, in this formulation, becomes something that we seek to destroy in order better to be able to tolerate it so as to be able to use it constructively as a means of shoring up our fractured senses of identity. In counterpoint to my reading of the affective experience of viewing the story of Justine in *Melancholia*, the overture, then, arguably allows us to perceive of the film as a reliable psychological object, one that can survive our efforts to destroy it, and which therefore extends an invitation to the viewer to take it in for later psychological engagement. The film does not only tell us that it will show us the end of the world before showing it to us. It also offers us the opportunity to experience a fantasy of annihilation as if it were our own through its invitation to identify with the central characters, their moods, and their experience. However, it also sets out to forewarn us that this will come at a cost, while offering reassurance that the cost will eventually become bearable, if we are able to take in the object and to find a way of beginning to speak its experience, as I have struggled to do for so long in relation to von Trier’s film. A Winnicottian approach to this dynamic allows me to sustain a hopeful and creative relationship to the experience. I can use it to try to forge an understanding of von Trier’s well-documented experiences of depression and mental ill health, and potentially therefore to make creative use of this experience

to articulate my own encounters with melancholic feelings.

In my earlier writing on von Trier's work in the "depression trilogy" of films (Bainbridge 2014), I have suggested that it can be seen to have therapeutic potential, and that this can be understood through the combined lenses of work by Winnicott on potential space, Klein on projective identification, and Bion on containment. Film becomes a means of working through the violent psychological experience of depression using the mechanisms of projection and projective identification, mechanisms that we use to make unbearable experience visible to others (Bainbridge 2014). In this way, film comes to carry a kind of therapeutic potential for both director and spectator. However, Thomas Ogden (1982, p. 26) reminds us that Bion offers an interesting take on such experience from a different angle: 'Bion insists that projective identification is not only a fantasy but a manipulation of one person by another and thus an interpersonal interaction'. Perhaps, then, film provides a means of communicating experience, so that cinema becomes a form of Bionian container (Bainbridge 2014; Fuery 2018) – but this formulation requires us to think about how the contained can be conceptualised in, through, or with film and its consumption.

Since publishing my work on these themes, however, and since re-visiting *Melancholia* in preparation for my public discussions of it, I have begun to think about Bion's take on dreaming. For Bion, dreams are unconscious thoughts generated in response to lived emotional experience, and they provide us with impetus for doing unconscious psychological work (Ogden 2004, p. 1355). As Ogden (2004, p. 1354) suggests, for Bion, 'the idea of the container-contained addresses not what we think, but the way we think, that is, how we process lived experience and what occurs psychically when we are unable to do psychological work with that experience'. There are striking parallels between Bion's ideas here, Ogden's re-working of them,

and early work on “cinepsychoanalysis” and the filmic apparatus. In film theory, the analogy between the dream and cinema is commonplace, but it is usually figured through Freudian or Lacanian ideas (Baudry 1970, 1992; Metz 1982). What would it mean to conceptualise notions of the gaze, cinematic identification, and so on in terms of object relations more generally, and through Bion's work in particular?

Bion's preoccupation with thinking gives us new ways to conceptualise the complexity of cinematic experience, as Kelli Fuery (2018) has observed. Such an approach offers a rich framework through which to reflect on viewing experiences of *Melancholia*, affording important perspectives on dimensions of artistic practice and its impact on spectatorship. In the context of *Melancholia*, however, it goes further, allowing us to read through the palimpsest of imagery, music, narrative, character, and film form to articulate unspeakable aspects of human experience in ways that facilitate the representation of profound psychological distress. We are both invited into the film with its lure of identification, and yet simultaneously reminded to hold our distance. The dream-screen metaphor is re-cast here so that it is not so much a discourse on fantasy and desire as one on the pursuit of experience in the name of psychological work. The ambivalence of this spectator position becomes complicated and difficult to keep in mind, as my own experience of this film shows.

Arguably, the ambivalent viewing positions situates us as melancholic through and through, leaving us with a profound sense of loss at the end of the film, and yet, at the same time, with a distinct lack of clarity around the question of knowing what it is that has been lost. We are positioned as viewers with ‘binocular vision’ (Bion 1965, p. 66) from the outset of the film, as I have already highlighted in my discussion of the overture. It is as though, in order to take up the invitation inherent in the projective identification offered by von Trier as filmmaker, we have to struggle to become

containers in order to make sense of the work. We have to internalise the experience underpinning the film as if it were our own, with all the implications that this demand carries in terms of taking in a loss that does not belong to us, but which, following Klein, serves to remind us of all our own previous experiences of loss. In taking up this invitation, then, we appear to adopt a particularly melancholic gaze, one that might account for the self-denigration and self-silencing that has taken place in my own response to the film, and my inability to speak of it until recently. Or it might entail an ambivalent response in which von Trier is dismissed as “a clown”, playing with ideas of emotion and psychological experience – an image offered to me by a colleague when I first mentioned that I was trying to find a way to discuss my experience of this film, and one that is common in media coverage of the director (Bradshaw 2011; Kermode 2011; Romney 1996).

In conclusion, then, what might all of this mean? Is there any possibility of finding meaning in a melancholic experience? Von Trier (Sweet 2011, 3.35-4:45) himself offers some useful insight here, articulating the importance of a psychoanalytic approach to thinking about the place of melancholia in the field of human experience:

Melancholia is such an important ingredient in everything that surrounds us ... It is like salt when you make food. If there is no salt in the food, it just doesn't, ... it brings out the taste. And melancholia is in everything, in music, in painting, and if it's not there, it's just not worth using them on. So, of course, melancholia, and I think it is in many people, and it is this strange longing, and it's the wolf, you know, crying at the moon, or whatever, and it is beauty, and it's scary, and it's cold, and it's warm, and it's ... no, melancholia is a

very human thing, and when it goes further than just being melancholia, and being, goes to a depression, or anxiety, or whatever mental disease, then it's of course not good, but it's a very important part of being a human.

Von Trier is certainly not the only artist to specify the particular appeal of melancholia in relation to the creative process, and art history furnishes us with plentiful examples of creative renditions of this link between depression and human nature. One of the most famous artworks associated with the melancholic condition is, of course, Albrecht Dürer's (1514) famous engraving, *Melencholia I*, in which melancholia is figured as feminine. The links here to the feminine take us immediately back to von Trier's mother's cruelty, and to the craving for maternal containment that resounds through the narrative of *Melancholia*, allowing us to read von Trier's provocations¹ as elaborate defences, of the kind invoked by Freud himself (1917). Importantly, however, these links also provide new opportunities for re-thinking that old chestnut of film studies – the question of gender and its relationship to the cinematic gaze. Conceiving of cinema as a potential scene of maternal containment might allow us to develop a deeper understanding of the emotional opportunities afforded by film and the sometimes puzzling, perverse pleasures we find in exploring unthinkable and unspeakable experience by means of this medium. Perhaps part of the problem with trying to think about the work of Lars von Trier is that it alerts us to our own internal iterations of his unpalatable character. I am left with the question of whether it is any wonder, then, that I have struggled to speak about this film, given its deeply troubling resonances. But perhaps this is also why the invitations to do so have been so compelling.

Notes

1. Melancholia is also often cited as crucial in shaping both Romanticism, and its hijacking as part of the Nazi regime – an association that usefully evokes von Trier’s infamous remarks at Cannes in 2011. When asked by a journalist from *The Times* about his personal German roots, the gothic aspect of *Melancholia*, and his interest in the Nazi aesthetic, von Trier responded outrageously with the following highly offensive remarks: ‘I thought I was a Jew for a long time, and I was very happy being a Jew, ... but it turned out that I was not a Jew, and even if I’d been a Jew, I would be kind of a second-rate Jew, because there are [sic] a hierarchy in the Jewish fabulation. But anyway, I really wanted to be a Jew, and then I found out that I was really a Nazi, because my family was German ... which also gave me some pleasure ... what can I say? I understand Hitler ... and I sympathise with him a little bit’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpUqpLh0iRw>) . Despite the palpable offensiveness on show, von Trier’s readiness to deploy unpalatable (and unsuccessful) “humour” in relation to such a shocking theme, can also be read as a form of psychological defence. The reference to the trauma inflicted on him by his mother’s revelation about his parentage is indicative here. At one level, von Trier’s unspeakably offensive remarks provide a measure of the unspeakable nature of this traumatic experience and the violent psychic losses that it created for him.

References

Bainbridge, C. (2014) ‘Cinematic Screaming’ or ‘All About My Mother’: Lars von Trier’s cinematic extremism as therapeutic encounter. In C. Bainbridge and C.

- Yates (eds.), *Media and the Inner World: Psycho-cultural perspectives on emotion, media and popular culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Baudry, J-L. (1974) Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus. *Film Quarterly*, 28 (2): 345-55. Reprinted in L. Braudy and M. Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory readings*, 5th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Baudry, J-L. (1975) The Apparatus: Metapsychological approaches to the impression of reality in cinema. *Communications*, 23: 760-77. Reprinted in L. Braudy and M. Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory readings*, 5th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Bion, W. (1965) *Transformations*. Reprinted 1984. London: Karnac Books.
- Bollas, C. (1987) Moods and the Conservative Process. In *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known*. London: Free Association Books, pp. 99-116.
- Bradshaw, P. (2011) Cannes Film Festival 2011 Roundup: *The Artist* saves us from von Trier-induced melancholia. *The Guardian*, 20 May. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/may/20/cannes-film-festival-2011-roundup-von-trier> (accessed 2 October 2018).
- Dürer, A. (1514) *Melencholia I*. Engraving, 24 × 18.5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA.
- French, P. (2011) Tell Me the End of the World is Nigh. *The Observer*, 2 October, Arts Review: 24.
- Freud, S. (1917). Mourning and Melancholia. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916):*

- On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 237-258.
- Fuery, K. (2018) *Wilfred Bion, Thinking, and Emotional Experiences with Moving Images: Bring embedded*. London: Routledge.
- Hunter, A. (2011) Rough justice raises ghosts of Hitchcock. *The Daily Express*, 30 September: 44-5.
- Husband, S. (1998) Lars von Trier: Finally, the Boss of It All? *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 February. Available at:
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/3671259/Lars-von-Trier-finally-The-Boss-of-it-All.html> (accessed 2 October 2018).
- Grigg, R. (2014) Melancholia and the Unabandoned Object. In P. Gherovici and M. Steinkoler (eds.), *Lacan on Insanity: Madness, yes you can't*. London: Routledge.
- Kermode, M. (2011) Triers of a Clown. *Kermode Uncut*, BBC Radio 5 Live, 7 October. Available at:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/markkermode/entries/32de3677-5183-3f56-8ec7-d113c29f5195> (accessed 2 October 2018).
- Klein, M. (1930) The Importance of Symbol Formation in the Development of the Ego. In *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-45*. London: Vintage Books, 1988, pp. 219-32.
- Klein, M. (1933) The Early Development of Conscience in the Child. In *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-45*. London: Vintage Books, 1988, pp. 248-57.

- Klein, M. (1935) A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States. In *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-45*. London: Vintage Books, 1988, pp. 262-89.
- Klein, M. (1940) Mourning and its Relation to Manic Depressive States. In *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-45*. London: Vintage Books, 1988, pp. 344-69.
- Klein, M. (1946) Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms. In *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-63*. London: Vintage Books, 1988, pp. 1-24.
- Metz, C. (1982) *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and cinema*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP.
- More 4 (no date) Lars von Trier on his depression. Video clip. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siegKLVZ_yQ (accessed 22 October 2018).
- Ogden, T. (1992) The Concept of Projective Identification. In *Projective Identification and Psychotherapeutic Technique*. London: Karnac Books, pp. 11-38.
- Ogden, T. (2004) On Holding and Containing, Being and Dreaming. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 85: 1349-64.
- Palmer, A. (2011) Time to get serious. *The Daily Mirror*, 30 September: 7.
- Pollock, G. (1998) To Inscribe in the Feminine: A Kristevan Impossibility? Femininity, melancholy and sublimation. *Parallax*, 4 (3): 81-117.
- Romney, J. (1996) The Clown Prince of Denmark. *The Guardian*, Features Page, T10, 4 January.
- Romney, J. (2011) *Melancholia*, Lars von Trier, 130 mins; Lars von Trier kicks off *Melancholia* with the end of the world in glorious CGI, then he hits us with a

mesmerising story that's moving, troubling and beautifully filmed. *The Independent*, 2 October. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/melancholia-lars-von-trier-130-mins-15-2364172.html> (accessed 2 October 2018).

Sandhu, S. (2011) *Melancholia* Review: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* is a crazily bold, visually enthralling, and emotionally seismic drama about the meaning of existence. *The Telegraph*, 30 September. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/8797335/Melancholia-review.html> (accessed 2 October 2018).

Sinnerbrink, R. (2016) Planet *Melancholia*: Romanticism, Mood, and Cinematic Ethics. *Filozofski vestnik*, XXXVII (2): 95-113.

Sweet, M. (2011) *Night Waves: Lars von Trier*. BBC Radio 3, 28 September. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/play/b0151r5m> (accessed 2 October 2018).

Tisseron, S. (2013) The Reality of the Experience of Fiction. In A. Kuhn (ed.), *Little Madnesses: Winnicott, transitional phenomena and cultural experience*. London: I B Tauris.

Winnicott, D. W. (1969) (1969) The use of an object. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 50: 711-16.

Filmography

Antichrist. (2009) Dir. Lars von Trier. Denmark. Zentropa.

Melancholia. (2011) Dir. Lars von Trier. Denmark. Zentropa.